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## WHO KNOCKS AT THE DOOR?

BY OLIVE SCHREINER

I LAY upon my couch. Outside for days heavy snow had fallen, and the long trails of the roses that grew over the balcony were weighted with balls of frozen snow, and the wind blew them hither and thither. They tapped upon the window panes and against the wood-work of the balcony.

I had grown weary of looking at that dreary world outside; and I rose and drew the curtains across the windows and lit the light at the head of my couch, and lay down again to read the evening newspaper.

It was the old, old story, such as one read every night: Death and destruction; "heavy losses of the enemy"—always that; and then the long straight list of names which one followed holding oneself tight, lest one among them should stab one to the very heart; then columns of hatred and abuse; then statements which men in calm hours would never make, or balanced men listen to; omissions and suppressions, till, amid it all, the mind groped like a small animal under a pile of decaying mould seeking to find the way to one ray of light; one judged what might be truth only by what was left out, and the reality by what was denied. It was an old, old story; one read it every day. There was nothing new in it.

I was going to drop the newspaper on to the floor, and try to turn my thoughts to other matters, and then my eye caught sight of a paragraph, in very small type, at the left-hand corner on the inside page. It was printed in type so fine and the paragraph was so short that many read-

ing might not notice it, and if they did, might not trouble to decipher it. Yet, it was something new; it seemed to have crept into the corner of the paper by chance. Having read it once, one read it over, and then again. It set one's thoughts travelling far.

Holding the paper in my hands, I think I must have fallen fast asleep, for, I thought I found myself in a great forest. On every side the stems of the trees towered up above me like the aisles of some vast cathedral, and high above my head the wind struck their mighty branches together. I wrapped my mantle tight about my head and struggled on in the darkness: there was no path, and the dead branches cracked beneath my feet. It seemed to be one of those primeval forests, such as sheltered the forbears of our peoples—Suevi and Alamanni, Goth and Visigoth, Frank and Saxon, Lombard and Burgundian, before we spread ourselves out over Europe from the shores of the Atlantic and the Bay of Biscay to Gothland, from the wet Tin Islands of the North Sea to the blue waters of the Mediterranean; who followed Ruric into the frozen steppes of the north, and Theodoric into Italy; and drank Sicilian wines with our Northmen leaders under the slopes of Mount Etna.

As I wandered in that impenetrable darkness, at last it seemed to me, as though, from far off, I saw a gleam of light, and it almost seemed to me I heard distant sounds which were not those of the forest and the storm. I struggled onward, and, at last, I came to a place

where through the darkness, under the over-arching trees, I could see looming a mighty building; light streamed from its windows of many-coloured glass, and from within came sounds of song and music, and loud laughter and shouts, as of those who applaud and rejoice.

I crept close up to the building, and pressed my face against a pane in a small window and looked in. It was a wonderful scene that met my eyes. Within was a vast hall built of richly carved woods, and the pillars that supported it were shaped in every lovely form, and sprang upwards into the groined roof, from which hung thousands of glittering lights; and along the walls golden torches were flaming; and beneath stood works of art, and scattered about the Hall were large tables, covered with glittering crystal and gold and silver vessels; and upon the tables were loaded all of rich and rare of viands and wines that the earth produces.

Around the tables sat men and women clad in gorgeous robes; some had golden crowns on their heads and sceptres in their hands, and other paid court to them; and the women wore jewels of gold set heavily with precious stones, till they seemed weighted with them.

And I saw that from table to table they passed the rare viands and wines, exchanging them with one another; and men and women sang and danced now before this table and then before that, and the feasters showered gold and jewels upon them; and I saw men take ornaments from their own breasts and pass them on to men at other tables. And I noticed that though there were differences between those who sat at the different tables, yet they were all really of one garb and one appearance. And I said to myself, "Surely this is some vast banqueting house, where a great kindred are holding high festival together!" And I thought,

"Surely never since earth was earth has so much of richness, of rarity, been gathered together in one spot." And I marvelled when I thought of the labour which had brought all these things together, where once only the trees of the forest stood.

And then, as I looked, I noticed that all the men wore daggers fastened at their sides: and as I watched, I thought I saw that though their lips were smiling sometimes their brows lowered; and I thought that some cast looks of envy as the viands passed from table to table; and it even seemed to me some whispered behind their hands as they glanced at one another: and though dance and song and feasting went on, the feeling came to me, that perhaps, all was not so well with that great company.

And then, I hardly seemed to know what happened, but at a table at the far end some drew their daggers and a man and woman fell dead upon the floor. Then from other tables others arose and stabbed at one another, and flung one another to the earth; and more and more arose, till from end to end of that great Hall blood flowed and men fell wounded and dying to the ground. And the tables were overturned; and the rare viands and the rich wines and glittering crystals and costly ornaments and rare works of art fell scattered and broken on the ground. And I saw that in their mad rage, men seized broken fragments from the floor and hurled them at one another, till the glass in every door and window was shattered and the very walls were indented. And I saw women, who, with wild, hoarse voices, called on the men to stab and kill yet more; and some passed on to the men fragments to hurl at one another, though they themselves fell often buried beneath the heaps of killed and wounded.

And I, looking on through the shat-

tered window, wrung my hands and cried, "Stop it! Stop it! Can you not see, you are destroying all?" But it might have been two small leaves in the forest trees overhead clapping themselves together, for any sound the feeble words made in that vast tumult.

And in their madness I saw men drag down the great glittering lights that hung from the centre of the Hall, and fling the fragments at one another; and tear down the lighted torches that were fastened to the walls, and strike one another with them. And as the lights fell down on that seething mass that covered the floor, they set fire to the garments of the fallen, and smoke began to rise. And outside the window where I stood came the stench of burning human flesh.

And I was silent with horror; for surely never since man was man upon the earth was there such a great and horrible destruction in any Hall where a great human kindred were gathered together.

And then, as I stood gazing in, it almost seemed to me, though I could not tell surely, that, from the far end of the Hall, where the great shattered doorway stood, I heard—three slow, clear, distinct knocks! I listened; and then again I heard the sounds, and this time I knew I was not mistaken—slow, clear, distinct! And as I looked across that fallen mass of ruin, it seemed to me, I saw, through a broken pane in the great shattered doorway at the far end, a human face looking in! The smoke came in between it and me; but I know I saw it.

And as I gazed, the flames began to creep up the walls of the Hall, and up the carved pillars, towards the roof itself.

And I wrapped my mantle tight about

my head, and turned away into the darkness and the night. For my heart was *wae* for the great desolation I had seen—that men with their own hands should tear down that which with so much toil they had reared, and should consume that which with so much labour they had gathered, and that so much of the rare and beautiful should be no more! I sorrowed over that great, brave company which had wrought so much. It might be, I knew well, that those whose knock I had heard might enter in, and take possession of that great Banquet House, and might even rebuild it in a nobler and fairer form: might build it so wide that not only one kindred but all kindreds might gather in it; and that the wine which they drank might give no madness, and the weapons be no more found at the sides of those who banqueted.

But for me, I was sore sorrowful over the destruction of that great kindred, and I wept as I stumbled onwards in the dark.

And the trees of that primeval forest as they knocked their vast branches together over my head, cried: "*Mad!*—*MAD!*—*MAD!*"

I woke: I was still lying stretched on the couch with the electric light burning at my head: the paper I had held up in my hand had fallen down on my breast. Outside the wild wind that had raged had grown silent, and the rose branches no longer tapped on the woodwork. I listened to the silence.

Then again I took up the evening paper and re-read the small paragraph at the left-hand corner on the inside page. And one's thoughts travelled far into the future.—*The Fortnightly Review*.